

Historic, Archive Document

Do not assume content reflects current scientific knowledge, policies, or practices.

1.9
H-752-Is
resort

IS THE MODERN HOUSEWIFE A LADY OF LEASURE?

Hildegarde Kneeland

Bureau of Home Economics, United States Department of Agriculture,

Washington, D. C.

Published in Survey-Graphic Magazine, June 1, 1929, p. 301.

In most masculine eyes-- and even in some feminine--the average housewife today is a Cinderella in modern dress. The magic wand of the Industrial Revolution is supposed to have transformed her from a household drudge into a lady of leisure. On every hand the opinion is heard that she has ceased to be a "producer", that insofar as she still has a job, it is that of director of consumption. According to this view, another wave or two of the wand will imperil her very existence. Her early demise as an occupational type would seem inevitable.

In the long run this prediction as to the housewife's fate will probably prove correct. For her fairy godmother seems to have no intention of ceasing to lighten her burdens. Every year, every month, sees a further increase in the use of ready-cooked food, ready-made clothing, ready-washed laundry, even ready-trained children--and this despite our almost violent prejudice in favor of the home product.

But we appear to have overestimated the speed at which the transformation has been taking place. We have been so absorbed in watching the changes in the home that our ideas as to what has already happened have gotten somewhat ahead of the event; we gaze into the future and think we are viewing the present. In the days of our great-grandchildren the housewife may be as extinct as the dodo. But at the present time some 26,000,000 hale and hearty followers of the trade might rise and announce in the words of Mark Twain, "The reports of my death have been greatly exaggerated."

Keeping our eyes firmly, then, on those 26,000,000 housewives who are with us here and now, we may well ask, "How alive are they, occupationally speaking? How many of them still find full-time jobs in their homemaking, how many are still overworked, how many are underworked?"

In a study at the Bureau of Home Economics we have been seeking an answer to this question. With the help of the extension and research staffs of several colleges, we have induced more than 2,000 homemakers to keep careful daily records of how they spent their time for seven days of a typical week. Most of these records came from middle-class homes--from farm and village women with whom the college extension service is in touch, and in smaller numbers from club-women in towns and cities. The results so far tabulated are surprising to those of us who by temperament belong to the historical, eyes-on-the-future school. Five-sixths of these homemakers spent over 42 hours a week in their homemaking, more than half spent over 48 hours, and one-third spent over 56 hours. The average for all is slightly over 51 hours a week. If this be part-time work, what, one may ask, would be full-time?

1133 1133
1133

No standard has yet been set for a reasonable working week for the homemaker. But probably we should all agree that more than eight hours a day for seven days of the week would exceed a reasonable figure, and that less than the 42-hour week of the white collar worker would be unduly low. If we take this range of 42 to 56 hours as roughly marking the limits of what might be considered a full-time job in homemaking, exactly half of the homemakers in the study will be found within this class, while one-third will be classed as over-worked and only the remaining sixth as underworked. Judged by this group of housewives, homemaking is still for the majority a full-time job, and too much work is still a more frequent problem than too little.

When we turn to the farm records, and include in our figures the time spent in the care of poultry and milk, in gardening and in other farm work which falls to the homemaker's lot as "naturally" as does her housekeeping, the number of part-time jobs fades to a negligible figure, and the extent of over-work takes on serious proportions. The average time spent in all work by the 950 farm women whose records have so far been tabulated is over 62 hours a week--almost 9 hours a day every day of the week.

The most suprising results of the study appear with the city homemakers. It is they who are supposed to be wasting away in idleness. Yet the average time spent in homemaking by the women in cities of from 2,500 to 50,000 is 51 hours a week, only a few minutes less than the rural figure; and for the large cities of 50,000 and over, the average, though lower, is still a little above 48 hours. Even this difference is more than offset by the slightly smaller number of persons in the average city household--4.1 persons as against 4.4 in the average farm home--and by the slightly larger amount of help which the city housewives received. Only 10 per cent of the women in large cities spent less than 35 hours a week in their homemaking--and there are few of us enjoying full-time professional jobs who would feel distressingly idle on 35 hours of work.

The similarity of the urban and rural records holds even in the distribution of the total time among the various household tasks. The city homemakers, to be sure, spent a few hours more during the week in care of children and purchasing, and a few hours less in cooking and dishwashing. But this smaller amount of time spent in the kitchen is mainly due to the larger number of meals eaten away from home by members of the city families. For the other routine tasks the figures are almost identical--about $7\frac{1}{2}$ hours a week, on the average, for cleaning, $5\frac{1}{4}$ for laundering, $1\frac{1}{2}$ for mending and $4\frac{1}{2}$ for sewing.

Even for the different sections of the country, the pattern of time expenditure is amazingly uniform. For the women included in this study, homemaking is homemaking, as far as the average use of time is concerned, whether they live in the East, South, Middle West or West, or in country, village, town or city.

Sufficient evidence is at hand to suggest that the time pattern shown by this group is probably fairly typical of the farm and village housewife, at least in the middle-class homes. The women who kept the records are undoubtedly above the average in ability, income and interest in their work. Whether this would result in a larger amount of time spent in housekeeping because of higher standards or a smaller amount because of greater efficiency it is impossible to say. But it seems only too certain that most of the 12,000,000 rural housewives are still carrying full-time or over-time jobs.

For the 14,000,000 city homemakers the situation is not so clear. They are, of course, a far more varied group than the rural women, and the number of records from them is too small to be taken as representative of any of their many types. But the conclusion seems justified that even in the large cities the overworked housewife has by no means passed into history; in fact she may still outnumber the housewife with too much leisure.

How can we account for this situation? In view of the transfer from the home of the spinning and weaving and sewing, the butchering, baking and candlestick-making of our great-grandmother's day, in view of the decrease in the size of the family and of the smaller and more convenient houses in which we now live, why is it that so many homemakers are still overworked?

A partial answer is undoubtedly to be found in the regrettable fact that our great-grandmothers were even more overworked. Even more important, perhaps, is the fact that a larger share of the work of the home was formerly done by other members of the household. Not only were there more families employing hired help, but more had grandmothers, unmarried sisters, unmarried daughters living and working in the home. Much of the gain which the Industrial Revolution has so far brought has gone into reducing the work of the household to a one-worker job. A sixth of the homemakers included in the bureau study received no help whatever, either from paid workers or from members of the family. And on the average they received from all sources only 10 hours a week of help.

A third explanation must be considered. The opinion is often heard that while the housekeeping tasks have diminished, the work of managing the family income and caring for children according to modern standards has greatly increased. From the standpoint of the homemaker's responsibility, this is undoubtedly true. But as far as the demands upon her time are concerned, the evidence seems to be against it. The homemakers in the bureau study spent an average of only $2\frac{1}{2}$ hours a week in purchasing, planning and other management, and only $4\frac{1}{2}$ hours in care of members of the family--in dressing and bathing children, in teaching, supervising and other direct care. It is the routine housework--the provision of meals, the care of the house, the laundering and mending--that still requires the bulk of the homemaker's time. She is still predominately a housekeeper, rather than a household manager.

Yet another reason is sometimes advanced for the fact that the modern housewife is still so busy. According to these critics, she has wasted the freedom brought by the Industrial Revolution in inefficiency and elaboration of work. Even the farm homemaker with several young children would now have plenty of leisure, they claim, if she would organize her work as well as her great-grandmother did and adopt the old-time simple standards of housekeeping.

Now, there is no question that greater efficiency in housework and greater emphasis upon essentials would do much to lighten the homemaker's burdens. But if we remove the rosy spectacles through which we are apt to view the past, it is not at all certain that we would find there the model for which we are seeking. Concerning our great-grandmother's skill in managing her time we have, after all, very little knowledge. History does not reveal her substitute for a time schedule. Of her standards of housekeeping, however, we have some evidence. And when we recall the cakes and pies, the pickles and preserves that graced her table, her starched linens and ruffled petticoats, and the intricate construction of her gowns and bonnets, we may well wonder whether our progress has been wholly in the direction of greater elaboration!

Whatever may have been true of our great-grandmother's day, this much is certain: the primary problem of a large proportion of homemakers is still how to cut down their hours of work to a reasonable number.

But how about those homemakers who do not have enough work? Unexpectedly small as their number appears to be, their importance is none the less great. For even today there are several millions of them, and we may confidently expect their ranks to increase. What solution can be found for their problem of too much leisure?

For the farm housewife, of course, the answer is simple. When her home-making drops to a part-time job, additional work lies literally at her doorstep, work which is flexible in amount and which she can readily fit into her housekeeping schedule.

It is the city homemaker who presents the difficult problem. For her the answer is usually made, "a job outside of the home". But those who make this suggestion are clearly not among the 2,000,000 married women who are trying it. If they were, they would realize that with outside work their troubles are not at an end, but are just beginning. For the great majority of jobs available are full-time jobs, and the homemaker usually finds that she has jumped from the frying-pan into the fire. Where she had too much leisure when she did only her household work, she has too little when she does that and another job in addition.

"Let her husband share the work with her," the feminist suggests. But quite aside from the possibly undue optimism concerning the husband's acceptance of this plan, can we consider it as anything more than a temporary makeshift? Can we look forward with any satisfaction to a way of life in which husband and wife prepare a hasty breakfast before dashing off to work, and return home at the end of the day to prepare dinner, wash dishes, and do the cleaning and laundering? Many of us have seen it tried. Some of us have tried it. And it is not our idea of a satisfactory home life, even for the family without children.

It is possible, of course, that the number of part-time jobs for women may increase. But usually even these jobs will require regular, consecutive hours of work--and three meals a day and the emergency needs of the family play havoc with such standard hours. Many of the homemakers with too much leisure, moreover, are "post-graduate mothers," who will find it difficult to get any jobs at all, since their years of full-time homemaking will have put them out of the running in the business and professional world. One of the most difficult aspects of this whole problem of the housewife's time is the variation in the amount of her homemaking work at different periods in her married life.

For many women there is a further limitation to this double job solution. The demands of housekeeping still have first claim upon their time and attention. They must adopt the occupation of housewife as a by-product of adopting the married state. In the long list of occupations reported by the census, there is not one for which we should expect every worker to be fitted. Is there any reason to think that the one occupation which the census does not list is unique in this respect? Is there any ground for our customary attitude that every woman can do her best work and find her greatest satisfaction in housekeeping? Is this not as absurd as to expect every man to fit naturally into farming? If farming, or any other one occupation, were the inevitable accompaniment of marriage for men, what, it is interesting to speculate, would happen to the percentage of bachelors?

I mention farming not out of loyalty to the government department in which I happen to work, but because it offers the nearest parallel to homemaking, in that it is one of our largest occupations, employing nearly one-third as many workers as homemaking, is carried on by isolated workers with a minimum of labor-saving machinery, receives many words of praise and little actual assistance, and is to a large extent unsullied by a certain and adequate monetary reward.

The conclusion seems inevitable, then, that the time spent by married women in housekeeping must be reduced--reduced not only for those who are overworked to a reasonably-sized job, but reduced as well for many others to a leisure-job--a job which can be done by the homemaker outside of regular working hours, a job in many cases so small as not to be properly classed as a job at all.

What are the methods by which these reductions can be made?

We might sum them up under three general heads. First, increased employment of paid workers in the home. Second, increased efficiency of work by the housewife. And third, increased use of large-scale, outside agencies.

The employment of "hired help," of course, is the easiest method from the standpoint of the individual homemaker. But it is a method which few families can afford. Only about 5 per cent of the homes of the country now employ paid workers, and there is little reason to expect that this number will greatly increase in the future. And fortunately so. There is no surer way of postponing a real solution of the homemaker's time problem than by foisting it on the shoulders of the unskilled worker.

It is possible, of course, that the future holds a surprise in store for the housewife, that in place of the unskilled maid-of-all-work of the past we shall see an increase in part-time skilled workers in the home, workers adequately trained and working under standard contracts as to hours, wages and duties. Such a development, of course, would demand a revolution in the conditions of household employment, but such a revolution is already long over-due, and gives some signs at last of putting in its tardy appearance.

For most homemakers, however, the cost, of even an unskilled employe is prohibitive. And many who could afford to pay for help find the disadvantages outweighing the advantages. What promise can they hope to find in the second method of reducing the demands of their housekeeping--in the new techniques and devices for increasing household efficiency?

The answer depends upon how drastic a reduction in working time is expected. Although this method undoubtedly has value, we have tended of late to exaggerate its promise, to overlook its limitations.

This is especially true of the application of scientific management to homemaking. Being Americans, we are greatly impressed by the efficiency of modern industry--by the small amount of time and effort required to turn out a large output. We are challenged by the comparative inefficiency of the household industries. We are sensitive to the element of truth in the familiar saying that "man works in the twentieth century while his wife keeps house in the sixteenth". And we have become very hopeful of bringing about a belated industrial revolution in the home through the principles and methods of management developed by large-scale industry. To some enthusiasts, we have here the magic formula which will bring the tasks of the household up to twentieth-century standards.

It is in the "standardizing of operations," in "finding the one best way" of doing a particular task, that most of these hopes for the future have their source. And that some gains can be made in this way is beyond question. Motions can be studied, steps counted, work timed and charted for the homely task of dishwashing or cooking as well as for the more honored labor of bricklaying, and processes revised in the household as well as in the "outside world".

But even in this most promising field, the possibilities are after all limited. Finding "the one best way" for even a simple domestic job is a difficult and time-consuming matter, requiring much skill and still more patience. The rare homemaker who is willing and able to meet these demands can hope to cover only a few of her many tasks. And using "the one best way" consistently and with reasonable speed, once it is found, requires more frequent repetition of the task and more uniform conditions of work than even the thrice-daily routine of dishwashing provides. The most the housewife can hope to achieve is a rough standardization, the elimination of the most glaring wastes in her use of time and effort. And even these limited gains will probably be made by a very small proportion of homemakers. It is well here to bear in mind that in the manufacturing industries, where scientific management had its rise, the percentage of establishments which have adopted it is still small, and yet there are less than one-third of a million factories to be reached by the "new gospel," as compared with twenty-six million homes.

Much more promise, probably, lies in the labor-saving house and in household equipment. For here the initiative rests largely with the builder, manufacturer, and high pressure salesman--and they are determined to rescue the homemaker from her drudgery. For the farm woman especially, and for all homemakers who are overworked, this seems the most hopeful solution. But the cost of a large assortment of household appliances, most of which must stand idle most of the time will greatly restrict their use. And in even the most fully equipped house, housekeeping cannot be reduced to a leisure-time job, if the homemaker prepares the meals herself and does her own cleaning and laundering.

There remains, then, for the homemaker who would carry an outside job the third method of reducing her housekeeping--that of transferring it to the large-scale, outside agency.

It is this method, of course, which has brought the major reduction in housekeeping in the last fifty years. And in spite of our antagonism, it is probably the method which will bring the greatest reduction in the coming half century. The equipment salesman may win out in the next ten or twenty years, but by the time the machinery which they are about to sell us becomes obsolete, the commercial laundry, the commercial housecleaning service, and finally that still most unsatisfactory agency, the commercial meal-provider, will probably have won us over as their customers, just as the clothing manufacturer, the canner, and the baker already have done. We do not like the idea now. A few years ago we did not like the idea of ready-made clothing. Our capacity to change our likes to adjust to changed economic and social conditions, is probably not at an end.

